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ABSTRACT

A study examined the instructional benefits of a semester-long letter exchange between first graders and preservice teachers in a language arts methods class. When first graders exchange letters with preservice teachers, all are involved in literacy events. Pen pals at both levels benefit from this correspondence. Often the focus is on the advantages for children as they write for real purposes and to audiences other than the teacher, but the other half of the partnership (the preservice teachers) can also profit from a letter exchange . Initially, preservice teachers "look at" pen pal letters noticing handwriting, neatness, and invented spellings. They learn how to read the content, i.e., the "what" of children's writing. Soon they change their focus and begin to look more deeply into the letters for an understanding of "how" students write. They discover children's strategies for revision, for the use of space, for punctuation, and for capitalization. They see examples of risk-taking and risk-avoiding. They identify growth through experimentation. Pen pal letters allow preservice teachers a closer look at language exchanges through a meaningful writing experience. As preservice teachers build understanding about children's writing strategies and decision making, they are clearly benefiting from a pen pal partnership. (Author/MG)

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Pen Pals: A Beneficial Partnership

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When first graders exchange letters with preservice teachers, all are involved in literacy events. Pen pals at both levels benefit from this correspondence. Often the focus is on the advantages for children as they write for real purposes and to audiences other than the teacher, This paper also looks at the other half of the partnership and examines the benefits of a letter exchange for preservice teachers. Initially preservice teachers "look at" pen pal letters noticing handwriting, neatness, and invented spellings. They learn how to read what children write. Soon they change their focus and begin to "look into" the letters for an understanding of how students write. They discover children's strategies for revision, for the use of space, for punctuation, and for capitalization. They see examples of risk-taking and risk-avoiding. They identify growth through experimentation. Pen pal letters allow preservice teachers a closer look at language exchanges through a meaningful writing experience. As preservice teachers build understanding about children's writing strategies and decision making, they are clearly benefiting from a pen pal partnership.

Pen Pals: A Beneficial Partnership

The development of elementary students' writing abilities and the contribution of teachers to that development are concerns of public schools and of university teacher education programs. When first graders exchange letters with preservice teachers, the two contexts are linked in a meaningful writing experience. Pen pals at both levels benefit from this correspondence. Both writers' strategies can be examined by the partner, using the letters as a lens for viewing, and a tool for learning. This study examines the instructional benefits of a semester-long letter exchange between first graders and preservice teachers in a language arts methods class.

Recently many researchers have studied young children's writing processes and recognize the need to involve children in writing for a variety of purposes and to a variety of audiences. Using function as the basis, Britton, Burgess, Martin, Mcleod, and Rosen (1979) classify writing as expressive, poetic, or transactional. Expressive writing is defined as "writing close to the self, carrying forward the informal presuppositions of informal talk and revealing as much about the writer as about his matter" (p. 141). Included in this

category is letter writing, a form of written-down expressive speech. Britton hypothesizes that expressive writing "is likely to be both the most accessible mode for younger writers and the key to developing confidence and range in using written language" (p. 142). Yet his study revealed that most of the writing done in classrooms was transactional, seeking to inform or persuade, and only 5.5% of the total sample of writing was for expressive purposes. Writing to pen pals helps balance this inequality in the elementary classroom.

Using a different classification, Florio & Clark (1982) identified four functions of writing in an elementary classroom: writing to participate in community, writing to know oneself and others, writing to occupy free time, and writing to demonstrate academic competence. Looking at the category of writing to occupy free time, researchers expected to find great diversity in the type of writing children chose to do. Instead they found "the function of writing to occupy free time was typically realized as 'keeping in touch' or making contact with others---often expressing in writing what would be hard to express face-to-face" (p.128). This description includes letter writing, a function of writing children will choose if given the opportunity, and a movement away from most school-oriented writing.

Williams (1989) determines the next step forward in writing to be the pragmatic view which "has as a major goal helping children see that writing has a purpose beyond fulfilling the demands of a school assignment" (p. 12). To be meaningful, literacy needs to be tied to the daily activities of students, to the real world. Studying eighth graders correspondence with pen pals from the Phillippines, Williams found that students' learnings about history and government were reinforced, but also noted an effect on writing performance. Williams explains, "What we see here is that when written language becomes meaningful, writing performance improves on all levels" (p.13).

Closely related to the function or purpose of writing is the writer's sense of audience (Britton et al., 1979). Teacher audiences dominated Britton's study of classroom writing. In particular, the relationship between writer and audience was that of pupil to examiner. Therefore, the weight of classroom writing is transactional, and is written for an examiner. Even if an audience other than the teacher is designated, school writing frequently does not actually reach that audience. Often it will be read "by a teacher or researcher, a person who may not expect to learn something he of she doen not already know or to have his/her

feelings, thoughts, or actions influenced by the substance of the writing" (Odell & Goswami, 1982, p. 202). Pen pal letters, however, reach their intended audience. Newman (1985) supports the use of letters to facilitate children's writing development because "letters are to be answered: they highlight the importance of meaning." Writing to pen pals not only meets Britton's recommendation that school writing include a variety of audiences and functions, but gives elementary students an accessible, responding audience.

When elementary students correspond with university students, they are provided with demonstrations (Smith, 1982) about writing. The letters themselves demonstrate letter format, conventions of writing, and text. Elementary students may use their pen pals' letters as models. Also, the university students serve as a demonstration of adults who write. Elementary students gain much from both writing and receiving letters.

How do future teachers benefit from this exchange? Very little research has focused on this half of the partnership. Newman (1985) used a child's letters to see what she could learn about that child as a writer. She looked at writing strategies and the factors that influence children's writing decisions. Newman suggests, "As

teachers, then, we need to look beyond neatness and accuracy when examining children's writing. We need to become sensitive to the experimenting that's going on each time a child writes" (p. 81). Newman's suggestion for teachers is appropriate for preservice teachers as well. By examining pen pal letters, preservice teachers develop understandings about children's writing development and decision-making.

Initially the preservice teachers in this study "looked at" the letters. At this surface level, invented spellings were both conspicuous and intriguing to the university students. As they read the letters, preservice teachers relied on context and letter name sounds to aid with deciphering, and they added to their knowledge of spelling development. Soon, however, they began to see past letter reversals, handwriting, and invented spellings.

After learning how to read what young children write, the university students "looked into" the letters for an understanding of <u>how</u> children write. Examining the process of revision, the preservice teachers were surprised to find that none of their first grade pen pals crossed out words. Some children erased and rewrote. Others squeezed in the extra words.

The preservice teachers became interested in children's use of space, or compensation for the lack of it. Some first graders filled the page with text very precisely, even if it were necessary to write the last sentence again. Others used pictures to fill the page. When they ran out of space, the first graders employed creative strategies such as writing smaller and adding new lines between existing lines.

Examples of risk-taking were evident as one child experimented freely with the use of a recently discovered convention, the hyphen. With children such as Jenny, risk-avoiding was apparent. Her first three letters continued to repeat the same message, "I will see you today it is a good day."

The decisions made by the children concerning mechanics interested the university students. They speculated about the reasoning that preceded the capitalization of certain words such as "school" and "soccer." They noticed that Crystal put periods at the end of each line rather than each thought, and wondered about her previous writing models. They recognized that when Michelle wrote, "Do you do MATHEMATICS?" she might have used her text book as a spelling resource. When Matt spelled "Nintendo" correctly, but misspelled other seemingly easier words in his letter, preservice

teachers questioned traditional approaches to spelling that ignore individual interests.

As the semester progressed the university students focused more on content and meaning. They saw that transcription may interfer with composition (Smith, 1982) as the first graders struggled with handwriting and lost the thought. The preservice teachers began to see language as chunks of meaning and understood why Rebecca would write "I like to go to school do you," as one sentence. They noticed a change in the language and content of their own letters and those of their first grade pan pals. The partners seemed to find common ground. Stella, for example, related her experiences to those of her pen pal as she wrote, "Do you like the presobl at Texas A & M?"

Research confirms the benefits of letter writing for children, but the advantages for future teachers are often overlooked. By writing to pen pals, university students have an opportunity to examine children's writing and to communicate with a child as they bridge theory and practice. Pen pal letters allow a closer look at language exchanges through a meaningful writing experience. As preservice teachers develop an awareness of children's writing strategies, they build significant understandings about children's writing development and decision-making.

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